

What the world must learn from its mistakes this year



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Next year could be worse than 2021 if we fail to adopt an enlightened view of our self-interest

More continuity and less change. This is the norm for any New Year, particularly if the world is stuck in a prolonged cycle of crises where years come and go but festering problems keep multiplying. Instead of 2022 marking a fresh start, the global outlook suggests an extension of negative trends that began a while ago. A pandemic that doesn't go: Top on the list of international concerns for the third straight New Year is the stubborn coronavirus pandemic and its ever-morphing forms. For a virus that originated in China in 2019 to still be on a rampage, drawing warnings of one more "tidal wave" (British Prime Minister Boris Johnson) and another "winter of severe illness and death" (US President Joe Biden), is an illustration of how the international community has failed. Throughout 2021, rich Western countries misread the fundamental nature of the pandemic, which is global and indiscriminate, and believed they could secure their respective populations through mass inoculation, hoarding of vaccines and restrictions on foreign travel. The result of this myopic vaccine nationalism was a fatal global imbalance. The fact that the Omicron variant arose in under-vaccinated Africa and then brought over-vaccinated Western healthcare systems to their knees has exposed the utter folly of the Global North. Global crises demand enlightened self-interest, collective responses and stewardship from powerful countries. None of these has been in evidence so far.

Hot, hotter, hottest: The same can be said of the all-encompassing climate crisis. The extreme weather events that battered every corner of the globe in 2021, from forest fires and droughts to torrential rainfall and floods, were largely unprecedented. Yet, at the CoP-26 climate-change conference held in Glasgow, progress on addressing climate injustice and mitigation fund flows from the Global North to South was sluggish at best.

The United Nations estimated that 2021 was among the hottest seven years in recorded history, and that the seven warmest years since 1850 were none other than the past seven years. Notwithstanding the push for a 'green recovery' from the pandemic-induced collapses of 2020 and 2021, fossil fuel-fired economic revivals that are battering the environment constitute an ominous sign for 2022. With little leadership coming from the world's great powers, the only hope for the New Year lies in lower-level climate-friendly innovations and adaptations by provincial, municipal and grassroots institutions and climate-conscious citizens.

Risky confrontations: Another overarching threat is of geopolitical rivalries triggering violence and even wars in hotspots. With China aggressively upping the military ante against Taiwan and showing an intent to crush Southeast Asian rivals and establish hegemonic control over the South China Sea, the likelihood of a high-stakes great power confrontation in the Indo-Pacific has been rising. The apparently expansionist disposition of the Chinese leader Xi Jinping poses a frontal challenge to the balance of power in Asia and is setting up a powder keg-like situation that can explode. How the US and other countries vexed by Chinese aggrandisement combine forces to deter Beijing without an escalation into outright war will be the strategic litmus test. The year 2021 showed that cooling down tempers with China, as Biden attempted, has not yielded any substantive concessions from Xi. A tougher line from Washington, coordinated with its Quad partners in New Delhi, Tokyo and Canberra, will be needed in the New Year. This will have to be calibrated to raise Beijing's cost of aggression, but must also leave sufficient room to negotiate settlements and avert war.

The other flashpoint in eastern Europe between Russia and its old nemesis Nato could also boil over in 2022 if not handled judiciously. Smaller countries caught in-between, such as Ukraine, need security assurances from the West, but they are also wary of depending on Western security commitments because US credibility as an external guarantor has fallen. In the New Year, if Biden is to redeem America's declining stature in the world, he should work out a compromise with Moscow so that Washington can focus all its energies on pushing back its principal adversary and 'pacing threat', Beijing.

Anger and desperation: Another factor likely to muddy hopes in 2022 is social unrest and upheavals in fragile countries, where the combined effects of the pandemic, economic suffering, an ecological calamity and misgovernance can ignite revolts, terror attacks, regime collapses and mass exoduses of refugees and immigrants. The kind of chaos that we witnessed in 2021 in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti, Myanmar, South Sudan, Venezuela and Yemen could be replicated elsewhere in 2022. In an age where global governance by great powers has faded, it is incumbent upon regional powers to douse the fires in their backyards and manage the spillover effects.

Without concern for others, cautious management of contingencies and measures to address socio-economic injustices, the world is staring at a 2022 that could be worse than 2021. The realization that we are in the midst of an era of cascading crises and that this constitutes a global long-term historical condition is a prerequisite for any reforms. For starters, a New Year resolution as simple as ‘the world is in trouble and I have a responsibility to fix it’ will do.

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